Final Consonant Clusters Simplification by Indonesian Learners of English and Its Intelligibility in International Context

Yuliati

Abstract—This case study aims to investigate one of phonological features by Indonesian learners of English, final consonant clusters, and its intelligibility. Final consonant clusters feature is classified as core feature for English as a Lingua Franca or an International Language. Thus, English Language Teaching needs to pay attention to support learners to produce the feature in more intelligible way in order to be successfull in communication. In summary, the study reveals that the range of intelligible performance should be the focus of learning so that even though the performance is far from native-like performance, it is understandable by speakers from many other background languages.

Index Terms—Final consonant cluster simplifications, Indonesian learners of English, intelligibility.

I. INTRODUCTION

As time has gone by, there has been massive growth in the use of English among non-native speakers in non-English speaking countries such as those in which English is a second or foreign language. In countries with English as a second language such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Bangladesh, English has an official status along with the first languages or mother tongues of these countries. In addition, people of these countries also use English in their daily communication for many purposes. Meanwhile, English as a foreign language means that English is not used officially or in daily communication in that country; rather, it is only learned at schools or other institutions and other certain places [1].

In these two types of countries the need for using English is no longer unique to communicating with native speakers of English. English is also used today by non-native speakers of English to communicate with other non-native speakers of English either from the same or different first languages backgrounds. Such a situation allows the first language features of speakers to influence their English mastery. On the one hand, people might want to retain their background accents, but on the other hand, they have to maintain the intelligibility of communication. People are no longer placing native-like performance as the target of their learning English but instead focus on the issue of intelligibility among speakers and listeners or interlocutors. In other words, as long as they can convey their intention in communication and the interlocutor responds well, then they are communicating with English successfully [2]-[4].

This change in the use and needs of English should be followed by a change in the goals of learning English, especially in the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. This is because in, previously in this context, learning English was about learning how to perform at a native speakers' level of proficiency. Additionally, in the contexts of English as a foreign language, the spaces of using English for communication are limited. People use English only when they are at schools, in foreign offices or companies, in international conferences, or when they communicate with people from different first language background. Thus, the possibility of producing some errors such as phonological, linguistic, or grammatical errors are high [5]-[7]. This paper aims to reveal the phonological errors by English language learners from Indonesia, particularly the issue of final consonant clusters simplifications and how this should be responded to pedagogically.

II. CONSONANT CLUSTERS PROBLEMS

Consonant clusters are considered to be peripheral parts of a syllable. A vowel and syllabic sounds are main parts of a syllable. In a syllable, consonants can be put both in front of (onset) or after some syllabic sounds (coda). English allows three consonants which function as a syllable onset if the first consonant is /s/, the second one is one of the voiceless stop consonants /p/ , /t/, or /k/ and the third consonant is one of these "approximants /l/, /r/, /w/, or /j/". The example for these words are "squeeze", "structure", "screw" [6].

Bahasa Indonesia, however, allows two consonants in the onset situation or position. In addition, in Bahasa Indonesia, /s/ in the onset position is not a component of a consonant cluster unless the next consonant after it is a liquid one. As a consequence, Indonesian speakers of English may find some difficulties in pronouncing those types of words. Usually, they add or insert a vowel sound between two consonants or epenthetic sound. This is called "schwa" sound [6].For example the word stamp may be pronounced as /sətæmp/ instead of / stæmp/.

However, Bahasa Indonesia allows double consonants in certain orders but other orders of double consonants are not allowed. For examples the words "sleek" and "track" are not problematic at all for Indonesian speakers of English. Yet, the order of /sk/ and /st/ are not observed in Bahasa Indonesia. English allows these two types of clusters. As a result, Indonesian speakers of English tend to pronounce the words

"school" and "still" in two syllables [6].

Similar to the previous discussion about consonant clusters in the onset position, English allows for final consonant clusters, especially related to the plural and past forms. For example the use of the ending /s/ or /z/ to show a plural form and /t/ or /d/ to show past forms. These types of consonant clusters are difficult to produce for Indonesian speakers of English. These speakers sometimes fail to produce them correctly in their speech even though they may aware that some suffixes are needed to show plural and past forms.

"...This type of final consonant cluster is a problem for many speakers of Indonesian. As a result, the plural or tense marker is often absent in their speech. Indonesians might be aware that the suffixes are needed and in their mental words they might appear, but the suffixes might fail to appear in their spoken language. Thus, while in the written language suffixes might not be a serious problem, they areso when English is spoken..." [6].

In English, a coda of a syllable may consist of five consonants. Indonesian speakers of English encounter difficulties in producing words which contains five consonants, such as "contexts" and "wasps". They apply a different strategy from that of consonant clusters in the onset position. They tend to delete some later consonants; for example, they might pronounce them as /kɔntek/ and /wɔs/ [6]. Errors in consonant clusters are considered to be phonological errors which may cause their speech becomes less intelligible [7], [8]. Thus these errors need to be paid significant attention by teachers and learners of English.

III. FINAL CONSONANT CLUSTERS BY INDONESIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

Research has found that for Indonesian learners of English, consonant clusters are hard to perform or produce. The research further explains that this difficulty is mostly caused by the different characteristics and nature between English and Bahasa Indonesia, especially related to the type of consonant structures or clusters allowed. English allows some clusters which consist of some consonants [6] while Bahasa Indonesia allows very limited consonant clusters. Furthermore, the difficulties are also, theoretically, caused by the notion of markedness theory in which English performs more marked structures than Bahasa Indonesia [6]. Bahasa Indonesia favours an easy pattern of syllable composition (Consonant Vowel /CV) and does not use any consonant clusters in the final or ultimate position of a word. Meanwhile, final consonant clusters are very common in English. This also includes the use of multiple codas, for example CC (word, east), CCC (learnt, thirst), CCCC (fourths), CCCCC (twelfths). Thus whenever Indonesian learners of English find consonant clusters, it becomes a marked feature for them and tends to be very complex to produce [8], [9].

Bahasa Indonesia also stands apart from English in terms of the application of marked construction. Generally, English favours highly marked structures in each sentence, which is considered to be very complicated to understand and apply or to promote in cross-linguistic acquisition by its learners.

"....Learners tend to make errors which involve altering the non permitted structures in the target languages to those which are permitted in the native language...." [10].

An example to support this issue was presented by some experts in the field of linguistics. Their study reveals that, in English, some voiced consonants are considered to be marked in the final position and this situation seems to be one of the constraints for English learners, especially when their first language or mother tongue does not have this feature. In contrast to this situation, English is considered to be one of the languages which permit all types of consonant clusters in the final position.

Some studies specifically reveal the difficulties of Indonesian learners in producing final consonant clusters. The most typical simplification they perform when facing these difficulties are devoicing and deleting some features [11]. Matthew conducted research on pronunciation errors by Indonesian learners whose mother tongues are Bahasa Indonesia, Gayo, and Acehnese. Gayo and Acehnese are regional languages which are spoken in the Aceh Province of Indonesia. She revealed that there are many terminologies used by previous scholars to classify the linguistic errors made by Indonesians. She categorises those errors into two types; developmental and transfer errors. Developmental errors are usually related to the process of first language acquisition - for example final consonants deletion, final consonant clusters devoicing [voiced consonants b, g, are replaced by p, k], over-generalisation (substituting one target language voice into another one), and approximation [11].

Another classification of pronunciation errors by Indonesians learners as stated by Matthew is the problem of transfer. This is related to the transfer of linguistic items such as word order, along with some vocabulary and sounds with ones that are phonetically close to their mother tongue sounds. The results are sounds that are far from the intended incorporation of the correct second language sounds into the inter language [11]-[13].

When Indonesian learners simplify pronunciation of final consonant clusters, they prefer deleting one of three consonants to devoicing, and when deletions occur they prefer deleting the sonorous consonant. In addition, when devoicing is the preferred simplification, they tend to devoice the obstruent consonant of the clusters. These simplifications are also done by other learners from various backgrounds of first languages such as Chinese, Taiwanese, and Mandarin [11], [14].

In her study, Matthew finds that many errors produced by Indonesian learners seem to be similar regardless of their regional languages. They mostly devoice final voiced consonants, and she considers this devoicing as a problem of the developmental process related to their acquisition of their first language [11]. Related to their first language interferences, voiced stop consonants are not found in the final position in the three languages of Bahasa Indonesia, Gayo, and Acehnese. Matthew finds no significant errors committed with the consonant clusters in the initial position. In English, the main difference between final voiced and voiceless stop consonants is in the length of the vowel right before those consonants.

Transfer is considered to be the most prominent cause of errors for Indonesian learners, but it is indeed not the only source of errors. In fact, some errors which were considered

to be related or caused by transfer interference from mother tongue to target language in further research of language acquisition turned out to be developmental errors [11], [12]. The study of Ref. [7] examined the language acquisition of young Spanish learners acquiring English morphemes. They found that most causes of errors could be categorised as developmental errors. They also found that the sequences of second language acquisition by young learners from many different backgrounds of first languages are similar to the sequence of second language acquisition by adult learners. This shows the role of developmental processes in the case of second language acquisition. However, the sequence of first and second language acquisition between young and adult learners are different in that adult second language acquisition shows more errors of transfer [9]-[14]. Later Matthew emphasises that there is an interdependent relationship between language transfer and development, and both errors are interrelated with one another in complex ways [15], [16].

IV. Final Consonant Clusters Simplifications and the Issues of Intelligibility

Collins and Mees [8] classify errors by learners in respect to the issue of intelligibility into three categories. Sadly, the case of consonant clusters is once again considered to be one of the errors which may affect the degree of intelligibility In addition, some studies have also found that the supra segmental has a significant effect on intelligibility [2], [6], [8].

Some studies which focus on the relationship between supra segmental features and intelligibility of non-native speakers have made some important discoveries, such as: correct production of supra segmental features increases the intelligibility among speakers in communication [17], [18]; errors production of segmental features can be mended by the correct and appropriate production of supra segmental features); supra segmentals teaching has more influence on the intelligibility of non-native speakers than the segmental teaching [19]; and most pronunciation instruction has moved from segmental-focused instruction to supra segmental-focused instruction [20]. All of these show how significant the effect of correct or incorrect suprasegmental features is on the intelligibility of the speakers, especially non-native speakers of English.

Jenkins [2] adds that using native speakers of English or speakers from Inner Circle areas as examples will be the best way to deal with the core features of pronunciation such as consonant clusters, since any errors in producing them can lead to a problem of intelligibility. This does not mean categorizing native speakers of English as the most superior speakers of English, but using them as examples because their English is considered to be the most intelligible of all other varieties[2], [21] especially in dealing with the core features like consonant clusters. However, emphasising any

correctness or native-likeness on the other features or non-core features is reminiscent of conformity. This is because the non-core features do not impede any intelligibility. Yet, for the core features, the more they are produced closely to the native norm, the more intelligible they will be. Unfortunately, the notion of intelligibility itself is something which needs clearer explanation because many factors affect intelligibility.

One of crucial factors which influences intelligibility is the notion of language attitude. People who have a negative attitude toward certain English varieties tend to exaggerate the level of intelligibility of those varieties of English. Ref [22], [23] finds that English speakers from southern America are often called unintelligible by people from other states although they show positive attitudes toward the English variety called Southern American. This means that the attitude of listeners toward the Indonesian speakers of English also determines intelligibility. For example, people with a positive attitude tend to understand the speech of the speakers even though the speech may be unclear for them. They may try not to focus on the form, structure or correctness of the utterances but rather focus on the meanings that the speakers are trying to convey. Meanwhile, any listeners who have prejudice toward English by Indonesian speakers may not be so willing to understand them, choosing to focus too much on correctness and form of the speaker's English.

An example of how correct pronunciation and listeners' efforts to understand speakers will affect the degree of intelligibility is the case of African-American English. This English is considered to be less intelligible since speakers of this variety inaccurately pronounce some words such as /aks/ or /as/ for ask, /pas/ for past, /trai/ for tries [24]. This problem can be categorised as one of sound deviations, especially related to the issue of final consonant cluster simplification. Mettler [18], [24] finds that, in certain cases, some speakers seem to give negative perception and attitude toward certain varieties of English, even though they basically understand the non-native speakers. This highlights how attitudes affect intelligibility even though it does not have any real negative influence on comprehension.

From the explanation above, it is clear that there are a lot of sociolinguistics factors which may affect the intelligibility of any language production. It is not simply a matter of correctness of form that may classify one's English as less or more intelligible. For example, the case of final consonant clusters by Indonesian learners of English may be intelligible for other Indonesian learners since they share the same first languages, they are familiar with one another, and they can also use familiar context clues when communicating. Yet, this phenomenon may become a problem in intelligibility when speaking English in other countries, especially in English speaking countries regardless the interlocutors' first languages. In other words their English turn to be less intelligible.

V. INDONESIANS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THEIR PRODUCTION OF FINAL CONSONANT CLUSTERS

Recently, any pronunciation differences made by non-native speakers in comparison to English by native speakers are no longer considered failures or deviance. An effort is underway to emphasise and underline speakers' own or local varieties, with the argument that these varieties should be regarded as having the same privileges or status as other varieties of English, native and non-native alike. Yet, this paradigm might dangerous in the case of English by Indonesians since this variety may not be well understood by other speakers of English [6]. Furthermore, since the English speaking area in Indonesia is very limited, it is hard to find any local varieties of English from Indonesia. Consequently, it is hard to establish any English local norm in Indonesia. In this regard, the norm of English in Indonesia should refer back to the one proposed or explained by Kachru [21] in which English in Indonesia is part of the Expanding Circle variety making it dependent on Inner Circle norms.

Corresponding to Kachru's notion of English norms, Indonesians consider English from the Inner Circle as the model for measuring their own English. Indonesians consider the phonological errors they produce to be incorrect up against this model. In other words, they do not like their deviations in pronunciation. Some of them are aware of the errors but find it difficult to automatically correct those errors. In addition, in the Expanding Circle, native-like performance is still considered to be the ideal target of learning even though people are aware that intelligibility is paramount. Because of this, people on various language backgrounds seem to be far from happy when their English is addressed as country-based, such as Spanish English, Indonesian English, and Chinese English; these labels are interpreted as reflecting English that is far from the ideal.

"It would…be far from a compliment to tell a Spanish person that his or her variety is Spanish English. It would imply that his or her acquisition of the language left something to be desired...." [2].

However, this view is not a universal view shared by all English speakers from Expanding Circle countries. There are also people who retain their background accent and focus more on the issue of intelligibility. As long as they can convey their intension in communicating intelligibly, they do not really regard any comments that address their English performance. More research to explore this hypothesis further is needed, though. Ref [14] adds that some English speakers from South East Asia, including Indonesia, drop one of the consonants in final consonant clusters while some produce them. Kirkpatrick considers the case of final consonant clusters as one of the features in English by South East Asians which only minimally affects intelligibility, especially when communicating with other speakers from South East Asian Countries. This phenomenon is considered to be one of the characterstics of English by South East Asian speakers which are mainly caused by idiosyncratic pronunciation of each individual speaker of English. He conludes that "communicative strategies" can solve the problem when any misunderstandings occur [1]. Such issues need to be explored further, though.

VI. CONCLUSION

Final consonant clusters feature is classified as core feature for English as a Lingua Franca or an International Language. Thus, English Language Teaching needs to pay attention to support learners to produce the feature in more intelligible way in order to be successfull in communication. In summary, the study reveals that the range of intelligible performance should be the focus of learning so that even though the performance is far from native-like performance, it is understandable by speakers from many other background languages.

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Yuliati was born in 1986, Pekalongan State, Sultanate of Indonesia. She is with the Development of the Indonesian Teaching Material Based on Multicural Context by Using Sociolinguistic Approach at Junior High School with Prof. Fathur Rokhman., M. Hum in Science Direct Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 9 (2010) 1481–1488 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Her another paper entitled Interpersonal Meaning Negotiation in The Teacher-Student Verbal Interaction was published in The International Journal of Social Sciences 30 May 2013. Vol. 11. No. 1 ISSN 2305- 4557.